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ABSTRACT

Fifty-six friendship dyads and 24 acquaintance dyads participated in a study of variables that predict friendship context. Subjects completed measures of frequency of contact with their partner in the dyad, of willingness to discuss intimate topics, of ability to predict how the partner would respond to selected hypothetical situations, and of perceived similarity. Results from a stepwise multiple discriminant analysis indicated that willingness to discuss intimate topics, frequency of contact, perceived similarity of values, and predictive accuracy formed the best discriminator between friends and acquaintances. In the acquaintance group, 88% were correctly classified by the multiple discriminant analysis; in the friends group, 85% were correctly classified. Results are discussed in the context of an information-based theory of interpersonal communication. (AA)

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EXPLORATORY RESEARCH TOWARD A THEORY OF
INFORMATION EXCHANGE WITHIN THE FRIENDSHIP CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study was designed to explore a combination of variables that accurately predicted the friendship context. Theoretic rationales for the conceptualization of an information-based theory of interpersonal communication were based on social exchange, personal construct, social penetration theories, and the uncertainty construct. Results of a multiple discriminant analysis indicated that willingness to discuss intimate topics, frequency of contact, perceived similarity of values, and predictive accuracy were significant predictors of the friendship context.

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EXPLORATORY RESEARCH TOWARD A THEORY OF INFORMATION EXCHANGE WITHIN THE FRIENDSHIP CONTEXT

One direction of the development of research in interpersonal relationships argues the distinctiveness of the nature of relationships in different contexts. Several authors have attempted to provide classifications of various contextual schemes. Von Wiese (1932) divided all dyadic relationships into two general categories, typical (genuine) and atypical (derivative). Bennis, et al. (1968) suggested a classification scheme built around the primary functions that relationships serve, i. e., emotional-expressive, confirmatory, change-influence, and task. Wenburg (1975) devised a contextual scheme labeling four contexts of interpersonal relationships -- basic relationships, working relationships, friendship relationships, and family relationships. The emphasis of these authors, however, was on developing a taxonomy rather than on the investigation of the relationships among the variables within each suggested category. This is especially true of the friendship context. Consequently, this paper is concerned with generating a theoretical framework by which to examine such a context.

Although "friends" has been defined in numerous ways, the distinguishing characteristics of such a context are not generally accepted. Von Wiese (1932), for example, described "typical" friendship relations as being more personal than "atypical" friendship relationships. Miller & Steinberg (1975) suggested that participants engaged in interpersonal relationships, such as friends, tended to exchange data on the psychological level, whereas participants in non-interpersonal relationships tended to exchange data on cultural or sociological levels. Bennis, et al. (1968) characterized friendship relationships as confirmatory in function.

There has been limited empirical investigation of friendship dyads, per se, because, in part, there has been little agreement to the defining qualities of friendship relationships. What basic variables actually constitute this context? Do relationships among variables take on unique configurations in friendship dyads when compared to other interpersonal dyadic contexts? Can friendship and acquaintance dyads be distinguished on the basis of specific variables? The present study was, in part, concerned with these questions.

The study of interpersonal relationships is at the stage of development Kuhn (1969) termed "preparadigmatic" and extensive research to provide theoretical focus needs to be conducted. Thus, the present study, while not designed to achieve theoretical consensus in the development of interpersonal relationships, sought to explore through empirical means of combination of predictor variables which accurately discriminated between friends and acquaintances. Specifically, the authors investigated predictor variables of willingness to discuss intimate topics, perceived similarities, predictive accuracy, and frequency of contact.

Bennis, et al. (1968) have suggested that the establishment of

consensual validation characterized friendship relationships. That is, individuals establish relationships in order to receive information about: 1) one's self from the reflected appraisals of others; and, 2) perceptions and definitions of situations being validated by others. In the present study, willingness to discuss intimate topics, perceived similarities, predictive accuracy, and frequency of contact were viewed as variables which facilitated the exchange of such information. Thus, theoretical concepts of social exchange, social penetration, personal constructs, and the uncertainty construct were used to conceptualize variables since the common denominator of all these theories rests on the amount and kind of information exchanged between participants.

Review of Literature

Willingness to Discuss Intimate Topics: Past research demonstrates that individuals' disclosure of intimate information differs according to the situation (Cozby, 1973). "Intimate" topics may be defined as those topics which contain information (i. e., personally private) that another individual could not obtain from other sources except through the target person him/herself (Cozby, 1973). The degree to which a person is willing to give information about intimate topics may be explained in terms of social exchange (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), social penetration (Altman & Taylor, 1973), and personal construct theories (Kelly, 1955)..

From the perspective of social exchange theory, people relate to each other because they stand to profit from the encounter. If costs outweigh rewards, then no profit is present, and the relationship will dissolve. When individuals enter into a relationship and exchange personal information, risks (e. g., the "reverse halo-effect") are always involved (Wenbug & Wilmot, 1973). Such risks can be categorized as costs. One way to reduce the risk and thus, maximize the reward, is to make the self accessible to a trusted other (Jourard & Landsman, 1960) through mutual disclosure of intimate topics. The more two individuals disclose to each other the more they come to know about each other. Thus, an atmosphere of mutual self-disclosure leads to optimal communication effectiveness (Keltner, 1970) which is, in turn, rewarding. Within rewarding encounters, new areas of personality become accessible, more intimate exchange develops, greater interaction takes place (Altman & Taylor, 1973), and thus, the exchange of information is facilitated.

Within friendship dyads, an increase in rewards of exchange leads to an increase in interpersonal attraction. When mutual self-disclosure of intimate topics is rewarding, individuals continue to disclose more intimate information (Worthy, Gray, & Kahn, 1969). Homans (1961) referred to this tendency toward fair exchange as "distributive justice" and Gouldner (1960) as "norm of reciprocity." Numerous researchers have examined willingness to disclose intimate topics from the perspective of social exchange (Cozby, 1972; Ehrilic & Graven, 1971; Jourard, 1959; Jourard, 1963; Sermat & Symth, 1973; Tognali, 1969; and, Jourard & Resnick, 1970).

Like social exchange theory, social penetration theory also helps to explain the degree to which individuals are willing to disclose intimate topics. From the perspective of social penetration (Altman & Taylor, 1973), a sustained or increased level of exchange in a relationship over time indicates that both persons are profiting from the interaction. This theory is illustrated by an onion skin model which depicts layers of systematically organized information varying in accessibility to others. A number of regions partition the self structure into sets of topic areas. Each region has a dimension of breadth (number of items) and of depth (intimacy of items.)

Within friendship dyads, social penetration theory suggests that relationships proceed in a systematic fashion with interpersonal exchanges gradually moving from superficial non-intimate areas, to more intimate deeper layers of individual selves. Across relationship contexts individuals, in general, relate more information about intimate topics to friends than to strangers or acquaintances (Ayres & Ivie, 1974; Frankfurt, 1965; Jourard, 1959; Jourard, 1960; Gergen & Wishnov, 1965; Rogers, 1961; Taylor, Altman & Sorrentino, 1969). Willingness to discuss intimate topics has also been related to other variables which facilitate disclosure. Specifically, variables of liking (Worthy, Gray & Kahn, 1969; Cozby, 1972; Jourard, 1959; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958) and the length of time spent together in relationships (Taylor & Altman, 1966; Taylor, 1968; Ayres & Ivie, 1974; Simmel, 1950; Berger & Larimar, 1974; Sermat & Symth, 1973) appear to facilitate disclosure. As more information is gained in a relationship, more areas of the person's personality become accessible. Thus, the exchange of information moves to more intimate facets, and greater amounts of interaction occur (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) helps to examine the relationship between willingness to discuss intimate topics and perceived similarities of individuals. From the perspective of this theory, friends employ a construction of experiences which are similar and thus, have similar psychological, physical, and role constructs. If similarity of constructs includes tendency toward disclosure of intimate information, then those with perceived similarities should be willing to discuss more intimate topics (Rickers-Ovsiankina & Kusmin, 1958).

The uncertainty construct (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) explains the relationship between willingness to discuss intimate topics and similarities in terms of perceived similarities of attitudes and values toward discussing high intimate topics (Simmel, 1950). It then follows that interactants within friendship dyads who perceive themselves as similar will also perceive the risk of disclosure as being relatively low since they would predict each other to have similar attitudes toward discussing these topics. In short, perception of similarity reduces uncertainty about the other's responses and thereby facilitates participants' willingness to discuss intimate topics.

In summary since friends penetrate more deeply into the layers of the self, thereby gaining more information about each other, reducing uncertainties, and lowering risks, the present study would

hypothesize that willingness to discuss intimate topics is a significant predictor of the friendship context.

Perceived Similarities: The function of the perceived similarities variable within the context of friendship can most appropriately be viewed from the perspective of personal constructs, social exchange, and social penetration theories since participants who perceive themselves as being similar exchange information frequently (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970).

From the perspective of personal construct theory (Duck, 1973), friends have been identified as having similar constructs and are aware of these similarities. Similarity leads to liking because "cognitive similarity leads to communication effectiveness, communication effectiveness leads to rewards," p. 305 and these to liking. Consequently, the more individuals perceive themselves as similar, the greater the likelihood they will also perceive themselves as friends.

From the perspective of social exchange, communication effectiveness is a function of perceived similarity of individuals plus opportunity to communicate (Simmons, Berkowitz & Moyer, 1970; King & Sereno, 1973; Alpert & Anderson, 1973; Triandis, 1960). Communication effectiveness leads to a rewarding relationship (Triandis, 1960; Byrne, 1961; Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970; Smith, 1957; Broxton, 1963), which leads to higher rates of interaction (Berscheid & Walster, 1969; Blau, 1962; Brock, 1965; Broxton, 1963) which, in turn, leads to greater perceived similarity. The previous relationship can best be represented by the following formula: $ce = ps + fi + pr$, where ce =communication effectiveness, ps =degree of perceived similarities, fi =frequency of interaction, and pr =degree of perceived rewards.

An extension of social penetration theory suggests that individuals in a dyadic relationship who perceive themselves as similar will be more willing to share information with each other. That is, the more personal contact, the more opportunity to find relevant similarities and to acquire information about each other. Thus, frequency of contact and perceived similarities are important facilitators of friendship relationships.

As previously mentioned, friends share more common constructs than nonfriends (Kelly, 1955), and thus, perceive themselves as more similar than nonfriends (Bonney, 1946; Precker, 1952; Richardson, 1940; Rosenfeld & Jackson, 1959; Izard, 1960). As perceived similarities between friends increase, the ability to predict each other's responses also increases, and thus, uncertainty is reduced.

The previously discussed propositions would lead one to hypothesize that a significant predictor of the friendship context.

Frequency of Contact: From the previous discussion of social exchange and social penetration theory, the authors suggested that frequency of contact between individuals determines, in part, the willingness to discuss intimate topics and the degree of perceived

similarities within friendship dyads. Some authors contend that frequency of contact is the result of propinquity (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950), but the concern here is with actual contact rather than physical proximity. A person's use of his/her environment is more than the mere presence in that environment (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

The importance of contact cannot be overlooked when examining the process of exchanging information within the friendship context. Frequent contact among individuals provides opportunities to gain information about each other (Duetsch & Collins, 1958; Mann, 1959). The exchange of information provides new information which leads to perceptions of increased similarities that are perceived, and the more likely future interactions will be sought (Homans, 1961).

These new interactions often establish relationships wherein individuals seek to confirm their own attitudes and beliefs (Bennis, et al., 1968) and reinforce their own self concepts by interacting with those who closely approximate their opinions (Festinger, 1954). Individuals perceive themselves closer to those who agree with them because of the consensual validation principle (Bryne, et al., 1969). Therefore, since friends provide mutual validation which is reinforcing, they would be expected to seek contact frequently, and thereby, increase perceived similarities between themselves.

Thus, the present study would also hypothesize that frequency of contact is a significant predictor of the friendship context.

Predictive Accuracy: According to social penetration theory, as individuals know each other more they are more willing to share greater amounts of information in greater depth. In addition, if the other is perceived as being similar in attitudes and values, then the interaction is rewarding, frequent contact is sought, and consequently, opportunities for exchanging additional information are increased. Inherent within this increased exchange of information is the opportunity to enlarge the data base from which to make predictions about the other's behavior. Therefore, friends should be able to accurately predict each other's future behaviors since they would presumably have large amounts of past information from which to narrow the range of alternatives about the other's probable behavior. Thus, predictive accuracy would be hypothesized to be a significant predictor of friendship relations.

Methods and Procedures

Subjects

Subjects were selected on the basis of availability from a pool of undergraduate students enrolled in introductory communication courses at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Two experimental groups were used -- friends and acquaintances. Those subjects in the friends group were asked to bring a self-defined friend (i. e., a person whom they "perceived as being a friend, excluding spouse or family") to the research

administration place. Subjects used for the acquaintance dyads were randomly paired classmates on the basis of every third name. The total number of subjects obtained was 56 friendship dyads and 24 acquaintance dyads, or 112 friends and 48 acquaintances.

In order to validate the assignment of subjects to friend and acquaintance dyads, subjects were asked to indicate on a five-point scale how "close" they felt they were to the person they were paired with in the experimental session. End points of the scale were bounded by "very close" (value of 5) to "not very close" (value of 1). Perceived closeness scores were then subjected to a t-test. Results indicated that there was a significant difference between friends and acquaintances ($t=18.36$, $df=158$, $p > .05$) such that friends' perceived closeness scores were greater ($\bar{x}=3.97$) than acquaintances' scores ($\bar{x}=1.25$).

Procedures

All subjects were asked to report to the research administration place at the same time on the same day. Upon entering the room, subjects were seated back to back with their dyadic partner so that they could not see each others' responses nor confer nonverbally. Each person was instructed to complete each page of the questionnaire separately and then return it to an envelope. Subjects were not allowed to go back and consult previously completed instruments to avoid sensitizing subjects to previous instruments in the questionnaire. Debriefing of subjects was conducted at the next class meetings by the researchers.

Instrumentation

Frequency of Contact: This instrument was developed on the basis of a pilot study in which subjects were asked to recall a friend of theirs who currently resided in Lincoln, Nebraska. Subjects were then asked to recall the average frequency per week that they were in contact (in person or by phone) with this friend. Results of this preliminary study yielded seven discriminantly used categories with the mean frequency being at least four times per week. The resulting frequency of contact scale was then used for the present study.

Willingness to Discuss Intimate Topics: An instrument to measure willingness to discuss intimate topics was constructed using 21 items from Jourard's (1971) 40 item self-disclosure instrument. The items were rated on high, medium, or low intimacy levels based on the category systems of Jourard (1971), Taylor & Altman (1966), and Ehrlich & Graven (1971). Predictive validity for these measures was demonstrated by Jourard (1971) who found high correlations ($r=.78$, $p > .01$) between "willingness to disclose scores and actual disclosure behavior of college roommates" [p. 171].

In the current study, self-disclosure items were modified into seven-point scales which ranged from "not very willing to discuss" to "very willing to discuss" this topic with my partner. The 21

items chosen were then reverified by ten students for high, medium, and low intimacy levels. Consistently rated items (i.e., all ten students had to rate the item identically); included seven high, four medium, and four low intimate topics which were then used in the present study.

Predictive Accuracy: A review of literature indicated that no instrument was currently available to measure the ability to accurately predict others' responses. Consequently, the authors constructed an instrument which operationalized this variable as accuracy in the prediction of how the dyadic "other" would respond to a close-ended item on a particular hypothetical situation. That is, each subject filled out his/her responses to a given situation and then predicted how his/her partner would respond to the same item. The researchers then compared predicted responses with the other's actual responses in order to determine accuracy. When predicted and actual responses matched on an item, the subject received a score of one, and so on. Scores were then transformed into a seven-point scale ranging from "not very able" (zero or one item matched) to "very able" (all seven items matched) to predict other's responses. A brief description of the development of this instrument follows.

The initial situations used in the predictiveness instrument were generated by the authors from written suggestions made by undergraduate students. Ten hypothetical situations included competition, honesty, jealousy, and helping behaviors within interpersonal relationships. Alternative responses to these situations were then generated from an open-ended pilot survey completed by 52 undergraduate students. Subsequently, the instrument was given to 86 different undergraduate communication students who were asked to indicate their responses in relationship to one of their friends. Results were item analyzed using a SPSS program (Nie, et al., 1970). This analysis resulted in three items being discarded as they failed to meet established criteria. The resulting predictiveness instrument consisted of seven forced-choice items which were then used in the present study.

Perceived Similarity: An instrument to measure perceived similarities between persons was constructed utilizing the McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly (1974) homophily scales. Four items with the highest factor loadings from the same study were selected for each of the four homophily dimensions of attitude, value, appearance, and background. Thus, the final perceived similarity instrument was composed of 16 items. The reliability for this measure, with the possible exception of the appearance dimension, has been documented across several studies (McCroskey & McCain, 1972; Quiggens, 1972; Wakshlag, 1973; McCroskey, Hamilton & Weiner, 1974).

Statistical Procedures

A stepwise multiple discriminant analysis (Nie, et al., 1970) was used to determine if friends and acquaintances could be accurately discriminated on the basis of the hypothesized predictor variables. Alpha level was established at $> .05$.

Results

Results of the multiple discriminant analysis are reported in Table 1. This analysis indicated that willingness to discuss intimate topics, frequency of contact, perceived similarity of values, and predictive accuracy were, respectively, the variables which formed the best discriminant function of friends and acquaintances. Perceived similarities along attitude, appearance, and background dimensions were not significantly discriminatory.

Results of the MDA's predictions of group membership are reported in Table 2. Of those subjects in the acquaintance group, 88.1% were correctly classified by the MDA, as were 84.8% of the subjects in the friends group.

Table 1
Stepwise Multiple Discriminant Analysis
of Friend and Acquaintance Groups

Step Number	Variable Entered	F Value
1	Willingness to Discuss Intimate Topics	67.94*
2	Frequency of Contact	57.24*
3	Perceived Similarity of Values	44.58*
4	Predictive Accuracy	35.05*

*Significant at the p .05 level

Table 2
MDA Prediction Results*

Actual Group	N**	Predicted Groups by MDA	
		Acquaintances	Friends
Acquaintances	42	37 (88.1%)	5 (11.9%)
Friends	79	12 (15.2%)	67 (84.8%)

*Percent of cases correctly classified = 86%

**Any subject who scored a value of 3 on the perceived closeness item was discarded from analysis (n=39), as no discrete classification into friend or acquaintance groups could be made.

Discussion

Results obtained in this study confirmed the hypothesized variables of willingness to discuss intimate topics, perceived similarity of values, frequency of contact, and predictive accuracy as discriminating predictors of friend and acquaintance groups.

In general, these results lend support to the importance of the amount and kind of information exchanged as a method to discriminate among contexts of communication. Thus, theoretical assumptions of social penetration, social exchange, personal constructs, and the uncertainty construct tend to be useful in the development of a theory of the friendship context. Coupled with the theoretical constructions of interpersonal relations purported by Berger & Calabrese (1975), Miller & Steinberg (1973), and Altman & Taylor (1966), to name a few, the results of this study confirmed that the more an interpersonal relationship develops, the more information is exchanged.

From the discriminant analysis of the four predictor variables in this study, it becomes evident that kinds and amounts of information exchanged are important in terms of defining the friendship context. As individuals gain more information about another, they are better able to predict the other's probable behavior and the more willing they are to discuss intimate topics. Questions which deal with the direction of effect of variables are ones that need further exploration. Does the amount of information a person receives about a friend lead to an increase in perceived similarities? Or do perceived similarities among friends lead to the exchange of larger amounts of information.

From the results of this study, a prominent predictor of the friendship context is the ability to accurately predict another's response. Such predictive accuracy appears, in part, to be a function of the amount of information that a person possesses about the other. Faced with the lack of an instrument to test such a variable, the authors of this study chose to deal with judgements about value-oriented topics, e. g., honesty, competition, and helping. The method used was demonstrated to be a viable instrument and further research dealing with the predictiveness on judgements which address additional task, emotional-expressive, and attitudinal concerns would increase its validity.

It should be re-emphasized that dimensions of similarities in appearance, background, and attitude did not discriminate friends and acquaintances. Perhaps as Rogers & Bhowmik (1970) suggest, such dimensions may not be relevant in all relationships. Once a relationship has developed to what is perceived to be the friendship context, these variables no longer become important distinctions. The significance of similarities of values as a discriminating factor offers much opportunity for future research in the examination of the content and salience of such perceived shared values.

Inherent within a discussion of kinds of information in the friendship context appears to be intimacy level. However, this study does not demonstrate if the perception of being a friend leads to a greater willingness to discuss intimate topics or if intimate discussions lead to the perception of a friendship relationship. Such

questions are open to further research.

This study was not, as such, designed to examine the content of the information a person would be willing to disclose, but rather the intimacy level of pre-specified content. Thus, a content analysis of the kinds of information that are reciprocally shared by friends could provide further understanding into the nature of the friendship context.

Thibaut & Kelley (1959) have hypothesized that an individual finds social support for his/her opinions, values, and attitudes rewarding. Thus, if a person perceives that the other person holds similar values then perhaps that person is more apt to penetrate deeper into the relationship because of the potential rewards offered by such validation. While this study was not designed to test perceived reciprocity of willingness to disclose intimate information, for example, it does appear that a study of perceived rewards in reciprocal exchange can be viewed according to the context of the relationship.

In this research, frequency of contact appears to be a necessary factor in the maintenance and development of friendship relationships since it affords the opportunity to acquire more information about the other, perceive more similarities, increase predictive accuracy, reduce risks, and facilitate willingness to disclose intimate information. Frequency of contact, as such, is the vehicle whereby information about the other is increasingly exchanged. Many of us, no doubt, have had the experience of conversing with a perceived friend of ours after a considerable length of time has elapsed since our last communication, only to walk away saying something to the effect, "It's not the same anymore -- I guess we've gone our separate ways and don't have much in common anymore." This testimonial comment aptly illustrates the necessity of maintaining frequent contact in order to acquire, modify, and add to our base of information about the other.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the purpose of this research was to aid, by empirical means, the construction of a theory of contexts in interpersonal communication. In other words, it was not designed to be a hypothesis testing study so much as it was an exploratory attempt to identify variables which may discriminate different contexts of interpersonal relations. Such variables should also be investigated in future research to operationalize other conceptual contexts such as family and co-worker interpersonal relations.

Clearly, this one study has not exhausted all possible significant variables inherent within the context of friendship. It has, however, empirically suggested that certain variables are significant predictors of the friendship context and suggests further extensions that can be made in future research to build a theory of information exchange within the friendship context.

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